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Your Best Friend **And Other Essays**

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By

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Your Best Friend

When the Buddha announced that his demise would take place three months hence, Ānanda, his chief attendant, implored him to appoint a successor to lead and protect the community of monks. The Buddha replied that he never entertained such an idea for, having relied upon himself alone to make an end to suffering, it became one's own responsibility to steadfastly lead oneself with a mind well guarded. He continued, "Therefore, Ānanda, be an island unto yourselves, a refuge unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge: with the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge." The Dhamma is the mind and not something hidden, secret, abstruse or as remote as the highest heaven where happiness for man is purported to abide at a future date. The whole range of perceptions, feelings and sensations such as desires, thirsts, triumphs, defeats, faiths and beliefs are founded on our thoughts and made up of our thoughts. The mind, being the programmer and initiator of all human action, is supreme, though the choice rests with each individual to be a master or a slave, sinless or sinful, saved or condemned, wise man or fool. Positive thinking is the unfailing recipe for mental health and well-being, and a mind roused by

alertness, earnestness, restraint and control over the sense faculties and the mind, is characterised by its wholeness, brilliance and clarity to comprehend forms and phenomena in their correct perspective. On the contrary, negative thinking brought about by sensual lust, sloth and torpor, restlessness, worry and doubt is afflicted and leads to paralysis, confusion and disarray.

Your intrinsic mind is your best friend who like your shadow never deserts you. It is a sturdy defender of morality, justice and righteousness. Should you have to plead your case for freedom, happiness and peace, the only competent court is your mind. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another. Few there are with a little dust in their eyes to realise this fact, while the majority not willing to be examined or censured by their own minds lie buried under the debris of ignorance and groan and moan that all things are vexation of spirit and life a torment. Every bulletin of world news unfolds a shocking state of affairs in human society, of global conflicts, man's inhumanity to man, infringement of basic human rights, all of which relegate man to sub-human levels. If every new day brings forth a new way of annihilating the human race, we have certainly got our thinking wrong and we have ourselves to blame that we have not lived in our minds but in all forms of

mania.

To understand ourselves, we must live with ourselves and know all about ourselves. The mind for that matter is flickering, fickle, difficult to guard and control and flutters like a fish taken out of its watery abode and thrown upon the land. Somebody causes you hurt and although the aggressor has disappeared from sight, the hurt grows within you and every so often keeps surfacing with an overpowering intensity to give you a warp. Then again, you see something that has captured your attention and your mind has instantly photographed it from every conceivable angle with a see-through lens, developed it in your mental dark-room, brought out the prints and enlargements with the skill of an expert cameraman and processor rolled into one. Similarly, all the sense faculties and the mind are of high sensitivity and respond to anything and everything exciting. If the degree of excitement is not sufficiently satisfying, you step it up with the use of drugs, intoxicants and poisons. This activity goes on unabated and makes of you a human derelict. A wise person living in his mind protects himself holding himself dear. Such a person whose senses are subdued, whose pride is destroyed and is free from corruptions, is calm of mind, speech and action and rightly knows, and is perfectly peaceful and equipoised.

“Therefore by watchfulness discard desires; expel them, sail your ship; and cross the flood to safety’s haven on the further shore.”

The Tree of Truth

In the dispensation of Dīpankara Buddha, although Sumedha Thapasa had the necessary attributes to become an arahant, he resolutely willed and worked towards attaining Buddhahood, in order to help you and me cross this sea of life. After myriads of years, he was born for the last time on a day such as this, under a sal tree at Lumbini, as Prince Siddhartha, with the potential to accomplish his life’s purpose. Though trained and tutored in the arts, sciences and political skills to be a successor to a throne, the more he came into contact with the outside world, the more overpowering was the impact on him of its grief, sorrow and lamentation. Choosing to master himself rather than rule over others, he went into homelessness to discover the origin of suffering, its causes, its cessation and the path leading to its

cessation.

For seven long years he vigorously practised the known systems which were limited in their scope. He then followed a "middle path" and using mindfulness of breathing as a starting point, took off on an exploration which resulted in breaking the barrier of delusion. In the pages of recorded history, no man had battled so courageously and indefatigably for so long to rout the forces of greed, hate and ignorance. It was on such a day as this, under the shade of the Bo-tree in Buddha Gaya, that a man triumphed over old age, decay and death to become a Buddha—a fully Awakened One.

He then expounded the sublime Dhamma, every word of which has the flavour of emancipation. Irrespective of class, creed or status in life, those who had the intelligence to investigate, to see things as they really are, embraced the Dhamma and according to their degree of effort and understanding, attained arahanthood, became "stream-winners," or at least walked in paths of righteousness. The Order of the Ariya Sangha was founded to help those determined to strive for the goal, to attend to the spiritual needs of the people, and to protect and preserve the Teachings in their pristine purity. During his ministry of 45 years, the beacon-light of the Dhamma spread to all parts of the known world, illuminating and elevating

people to noble heights through its principles of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. He passed away into the unconditioned on a day like this under a sal tree at Kusinara in perfect control over his faculties, exhorting his followers to rely upon themselves alone, to work out their salvation with diligence.

When the Buddha was questioned as to who unravels this inner and outer tangle in which this generation is entangled, he answered that a wise man who is well-established in virtue, develops mindfulness and understanding succeeds in doing so. The purpose and content of the Dhamma is to encourage ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom in each person, making the fathom-long body with its perceptions, sensations and thoughts one's experimental laboratory. Under microscopic observation one could discern that the mind and body are no more than insubstantial formations whose nature is to arise and pass away depending on conditions. Life we prize so dearly is brittle and uncertain, lasting as long as the present moment lasts, to be succeeded by another making a chain of linked moments. Realisation of this brings about a calming of the senses helping one to be less tenacious and less greedy. In our ignorance we claim possession and lordship over life which exists only by its fleeting

nature. The truth is that the present moment holds life for you and me and all sentient beings, and happiness lies in living that moment fully and completely, with the mind unburdened and cleansed.

On a day such as this, thrice-blessed, we contemplate on the life of the Buddha and his virtues to draw inspiration therefrom to live and let live. An instance of his compassion even in his childhood was his claim to ownership of an injured bird that he nursed to recovery, after it had been shot down by cousin Devadatta:

“... Say, No! the bird is mine
The first of myriad things that shall be mine
By right of mercy and love’s lordliness.”

As a searcher after truth, meeting that perfect embodiment of womanhood Sujata, who admitted that her sole concern lay in doing her duty by her husband, child, friends, relations and servants, he approvingly observed: “In thee is seen why there is hope for man,” from which we learn that warm human relationships help to sustain man. In Buddhahood, the compassionate One regulated his daily life with two hours for his repose and the rest of his time he gave to others for their well-being and bliss.

After the Buddha announced his impending demise, some of the sorrowing monks who had not attained any "stage" alleged that Bhikkhu Dhammārāma appeared to be heartless as he displayed no emotional change. When at an assembly, the Buddha questioned him, Dhammarama stated that without any delay he had gone into meditation in order to attain arahanthood before the passing away of the Buddha. The Buddha then held him up as a model with these words:

“Who honours the Dhamma, honours me best.”

On this day of Vesak, let us cast away our hatreds and greeds, delusions and illusions and with *metta*, that selfless all-embracing love, help to change ourselves, our society, our country and the world into an abode of lasting peace.

The Eye of the Beholder

The dread of disease, decay, old age and death, the pain of being united with loathsome things, the misery

and despair of having to part from loved ones and treasured possessions, the disappointment arising from cravings unsatisfied, all these lead to grief, sorrow and lamentation. The Bodhisattva in his last round of births, treading a “middle path,” focussed his attention to discover the nature and content of his mind. With the development of right concentration and right mindfulness, veil upon veil was lifted and he became fully awakened, deliverance to obtain. He was replete with knowledge including reminiscence of past births, re-appearing of beings and the comprehension of the cessation of things. He described his unique experience thus: “As something never known before, vision arose in me, wisdom arose in me, intuition arose in me, light arose in me. This is called true excellence.” Thenceforth, out of profound compassion, his constant endeavour was to promote in mankind ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom, so that as beneficiaries of the sublime Dhamma, you and I may walk through this world in righteousness, eschewing greed, hate and ignorance.

The Dhamma enunciated by the Buddha may be epitomised by the word *appamāda* which means: heedfulness, ever-present mindfulness, watchfulness, diligence, earnestness in doing good. “The heedful do not die but the heedless are like unto the dead.” Heedfulness arises from a meditative mind that can

never be overwhelmed by the floods of sense-desires, false beliefs, cravings for existence and ignorance. Such a mind is serene, unsullied, unfragmented and full of energy to see things wisely—that their inherent nature is to arise and pass away, that they are momentary, that there is no substance of enduring quality and that the more one clings, the more difficult it is to let go. Such a mind so precise and even, has infinite love for all living things, is deeply concerned with others' misery and has no element of envy.

Thoughts associated with sense faculties create feelings, sensations and memories. Though thought is constantly changing and has no permanency it invents for itself this or that to give it continuity. This is an illusion, accustomed as we are to think in terms of a person behind the thinking. In reality it is the thought that has put the thinker together and the thinker is the thought. Therefore, thought is all we know and life's purpose is to bring about order in our thinking. This becomes possible when each one understands for oneself the good and the evil:

“Evil swells the debts to pay.
Good delivers and acquits;
Shun evil, follow good; hold sway
Over thyself. That is the way.”

Subha, a bhikkhunī, while walking in a woodland was

accosted by a gallant who perceiving her faultless beauty, invited her to be his bride, offering her silks, gold, pearls, sumptuous food and all that go to make a luxurious life. Subha asked him what he saw in her carrion-filled, grave-filling carcase, so fragile, that warranted his infatuation. He replied that it was her gazelle-like eyes that fed the depth of his passions. Remarking that he had been deluded by compost wrought in the form of an eye, she tore it out and gave it to him. Straightaway the lust ceased in him and he begged her pardon.

What motivates your life is within you and nowhere else and, like a lotus of countless petals, waiting to unfold itself.

A Father's Legacy

On the occasion when the Buddha visited Kapilavatthu, Yasodharā pointing to the Buddha told her seven-year old son Rāhula, “There is your father, go ask him for your inheritance.” Little Rāhula, impressed by the charismatic personality of the

Buddha, ran up to him and holding his hand, walked beside him. Experiencing a feeling of serenity he instinctively remarked, "Father, even your shadow is balm." The happiness of the situation made him forget the purpose of his mission and when he did make his request, the Buddha assured him of the imperishable inheritance he was bequeathing to him and all mankind as a testament of his supreme love. Yasodhara little dreamed then that her desire to see her son next in line of succession to the throne had caused Rāhula to step out into homelessness and renunciation to rule over himself rather than rule over others.

The Buddha, having extinguished within himself the fires of greed, hate and ignorance, attained a state of consummate peace, blazing for others the path for its attainment.

The ills of this world, the fierce struggle for survival, and man's inhumanity to man are of our making. In order to bring about a radical transformation, we must begin with a revolution from within oneself. For this purpose, one must comprehend the complete process of thought. Thoughts arise from the activity of the sense impulses and consciousness in relation to memories of past experiences. These memories conditioned by beliefs, theories and our own individual additions, subtractions, touching-up and

labelling, are transformed from the real into the unreal. For example, a lump of Epsom salts with its characteristic bitterness could at first sight be mistaken for a lump of sugar with its sweetness. Therefore this conditioned thought not arising from right view and right understanding misleads, thereby causing mental conflict and unhappiness. The root cause of our problem is that we labour under a delusion when we believe there is a person to think and experience, when in reality the thinker is the thought and the experiencer the experience.

The process of right thinking has been elucidated in the Buddha's briefest sermon to Bahiya Dāruciriya to the effect that when one sees it is choiceless observation; when one hears it is mere sound; when one tastes, smells and feels, it is mere cognition and sensing. As this requires undivided attention and a great amount of mindfulness, it is only then that the mind remains uncluttered by residual memories and delusions and has the clarity and alertness to meet with its full potential each moment and situation. Thought is limited by the boundaries of time while the ending of thought opens the mind into a state of limitlessness and timelessness.

“The restless, busy nature of the world, this I declare is at the root of pain. Attain that composure of mind which is resting in the peace of immortality. Self

is but a heap of composite qualities and its world is empty like a phantasy.”

A Guide to Achievement

“By faith one crosses over the stream.
By strenuousness the sea of life;
By steadfastness all greed he stills.
By wisdom he is purified.”

When Sudatta, the millionaire of Sāvattthī, called on his good friend the millionaire of Rājagaha, the geniality which usually prevailed on such happy occasions was missing. He observed, instead, his friend wholly committed with arrangements for a festive event. In answer to his queries, he learnt that the Buddha had been invited the next day to his friend’s to an alms-giving. The mere mention of “Buddha” sent him into raptures and there arose in him a consummate yearning to meet him. Ascertaining the directions to his place of abode and having spent a sleepless night in eager anticipation, he

set out at dawn on a momentous journey. An eerie darkness almost made him panic, had it not been for the trust in the Buddha that gave him the confidence and determination to forge ahead courageously. Nearing his destination, he saw a person whom he unmistakably recognised as the Buddha, calling out to him by name which engendered in him a sense of joyousness and exaltation. Exchanging greetings, he politely inquired from the Buddha whether he had enjoyed good sleep out in the woodland to which he replied that a person who has eradicated all desires has a tranquil mind conducive to perfect sleep.

The Buddha then expounded to him the Dhamma which helped him destroy the fetters of egoity, doubt regarding the Buddha and the Doctrine, and the efficacy of rites and ceremonies to become a Sotāpanna (Stream-winner). Sudatta, now an avowed disciple of the Buddha, invited him to visit Sāvaththī, which invitation he accepted. Returning to Sāvaththī he purchased from prince Jeta a prestigious park at a fabulous price and constructed thereon Jetavanārāma which he dedicated to the Buddha and his Order. The feeding, medical and welfare arrangements were made for 1000 monks daily. Thus Sudatta, better known as Anāthapiṇḍika, by his acts of benevolence, qualified for the rare honour of being the Buddha's chief benefactor. The Buddha spent 25 rainy seasons at

Jetavanārāma during which time, beside numerous important incidents occurring there, he enunciated a good part of what is contained in the voluminous Tipiṭaka. A pilgrim devotee having an abiding faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and the Order on visiting Jetavanārāma cannot escape feeling the aura of him who triumphed over greed, hatred and delusion so that you and I may, as our birthright, tread the path to deliverance.

The Buddha has admonished honest seekers after the truth that nothing should be accepted for reasons that it is rumoured to be so, because of its traditional belief, because the majority hold to it, because it is the product of metaphysical argument and speculation, because it conforms with one's inclination, because it is authoritative or because of the prestige value of one's teacher. The truth has to be self realised, with wisdom, each for himself, here and now. His method is one of critical investigation and personal verification. He went so far as to state that hurt arising from dispraise of him, the Dhamma and the Order being a cause for harm, and praise leading to elation of spirits without knowing whether the qualities praised in him are actually present, are obstacles, and the seeker should reject them. Such was the profound concern of the Teacher of gods and men that they should neither fall into error nor be misled.

The purpose of life is to live it and not to step out of it as is done by most of us, thereby bringing upon ourselves emptiness, loneliness and frustration. In order to live, we have to understand ourselves fully and completely, by which process the real from the unreal becomes clear. What is, is real and what should be, a myth and a fallacy. That man's life is a travail can only be seen as a reality not with the afflicted eye but the mind's eye. Seeing this reality a person knows the immediate need to meet the challenge with ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom as the Buddha had done to be fully awakened. The truth of the matter is that you do not possess life but life possesses you.

Life's Computer

The five orders (*niyāma*) comprising physical inorganic order, order of germs and seeds, order of act and result, order of the norm and order of mind or psychic law, operate in the physical and mental realms with flawless accuracy, without a law-giver, and you are what you are according to the sum total of your

thoughts and actions in this and previous existences. Your maker and unmaker being your own mind which perpetually motivates *kamma* (actions) good, bad or neutral, you alone are the architect of your fortunes and misfortunes which keep pursuing you as night follows day. In this age of science we are most fortunate to see and understand how the electronic computer works. On the same principle, you are a computer-cum-programmer from the very day of your beginning. Depending on the data fed into your computer of thoughts and actions arising from you alone, every new moment contains within it the *vipāka* (result). There is neither an unseen person to dispense judgment nor the necessity for a time lag for its operation. The potentiality of the seed to grow into a tree, flower, bear fruit and perish is within the seed itself and not outside it. Similarly, where birth is, is decay, old age and death, making life an exclusively inside job. It is then a matter of mere conjecture to hope for an intercessor to work out one's salvation, for one reaps what one sows.

The life process being a connected series of moments having endless continuity as long as the grasping lasts, it is necessary, as breath is to life, to practise the ten *pāramis* (perfections) of generosity, discipline, unselfishness, wisdom, energy, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and

equanimity to get the maximum benefits of life. The Bodhisattva practised these at the higher and highest levels, so that in his final birth, he had in full measure the attributes necessary to accomplish his mission. Having awakened from ignorance, he laid bare the whole secret of life, with the competence of one having passed through the real experience and not as a dream or hallucination. The Dhamma (truth) which requires one to free oneself from the illusion of self, to cleanse one's mind, to give up one's thirst and lead a life of righteousness, helps one walk through the highways and by-ways of life without losing one's bearings to roam in heavens, hells and inter-states.

The purpose of life is to live as human beings. It is because of our losing sight of this important fact, or not understanding it in all its implications, that we find ourselves petty, insufferable and miserable. The world is what is, wholly intended to help us work out our weal with diligence. As a matter of habit, we live in our thoughts and see the strife and stress of daily life as something inescapable. Thoughts are no more than shadows of the mind and by their unrealistic nature must mislead, creating the havoc that follows a cyclone. The mind, on the other hand, being real, abides in happiness and its activities go to sustain life. The purpose of the Dhamma is to bring about that skill to discern between the real and the unreal so that

one lives and not merely exists. The skill is brought about by *satipaṭṭhānā*— the setting up or the application of mindfulness in regard to the body, feelings and sensations, activities of the mind and mental objects or mental contents.

The Buddha was asked as to how his monks had such an incandescent complexion, over-shadowing that of the highest gods, although they made their comfortless abode in the forest and had one frugal meal a day for bodily sustenance. The Buddha replied that the monks live in the present moment, mindful of every action, making them exultantly happy. Those using the present moment (which is all we know as the truth) to live in the ashes of the past or the dreams of the future, have an impaired blood circulation which results in a poor complexion. Meditation is therefore the summation of energy and the very essence of our daily living.

“The meditative mind is seeing—watching, listening, without a word, without a comment, without an opinion—attentive to the movement of life in all its relationships throughout the day. And at night, when the whole organism is at rest, the meditative mind has no dreams for it has been awake all day.”

The Way of Wisdom

On the invitation of King Kalabu, the revered hermit Khantivāda spent the *vassa* (rainy) season in the royal park expounding the virtues of *khanti* (patience). One day the king, having visited the park to celebrate an event, wined and dined sumptuously and while being musically entertained, fell asleep on the lap of a palace damsel. Out of consideration for the repose of the slumbering king, the others made their way to the hermit yonder.

Unable to endure her loneliness anymore and having schemed to exploit a situation to her personal advantage, the damsel jerked her leg which startled the king from his sleep. To his inquiry as to what had happened to the members of his entourage, she craftily replied that while she remained faithful to him, the rest departed seeking the company of the hermit who to them, was more important than the king. Incensed at the alleged affront to royalty, he hurried to where the hermit was holding his sessions. The attention of the audience being raptly focussed on the hermit, the king's presence went unnoticed thereby adding insult to injury.

Unable to contain himself anymore, he vented his

anger on the hermit by having him severely beaten up. Though battered, bruised and bleeding, when the king inquired whether he yet had patience, his reply was that it remained unchanged. Then starting with the extremities, the limbs were cut off until all that remained of the hermit was a maimed, limbless torso. Hoping by then that the patience had disintegrated, he asked the dying hermit where his *khanti* lay. When to his chagrin he was told that the hermit's patience abode in his mind, in exasperation, he kicked the hermit with such force that he lost his balance and fell to the ground which opened to receive him. The dismayed ministers begged of the hermit not to curse the king and the country for the sacrilegious crime perpetrated on him on account of the king's temporary insanity arising from a state of intoxication. The hermit on the contrary was not only forgiving but praised the king's action for testing his patience, thus helping him develop *khanti* to an acme of perfection, *paramattha pārami*, in patience. Incidentally, the hermit was an aspirant to Buddhahood.

Kalabu got away with murder for the reason that a king can do no wrong. With no such immunity to protect us, we may not take the law into our own hands for fear of dire consequences. Nevertheless, we are potential Kalabus with greed, hatred and delusion overpowering us and ruling over our thoughts and

actions. Our problem lies in the fact that we associate a deed with a doer and an experience with an experiencer, when in fact we are no more than a compounded thing with feelings and sensations arising and passing away from moment to moment, depending on causes and conditions. With right understanding and right view, one learns to abhor greed and hatred, and not the person or thing that causes the response. Everything in the world, however disagreeable it may seem, could with the exercising of universal love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity be changed, if not to right-out happiness, then to an opportunity for practising virtue and gaining insight. This is the way of wisdom.

“Oh bhikkhus, I have taught a doctrine similar to a raft, it is for the purpose of crossing over, not for holding fast to it. You bhikkhus, who understand that the teaching is similar to a raft should give up even the good things. How much more then should you give up evil things.” From this parable it is very clear that the Buddha was a practical teacher, teaching only those things that bring peace and happiness to man.

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Your Best Friend	4
The Tree of Truth	7
The Eye of the Beholder	11
A Father's Legacy	14
A Guide to Achievement	17
Life's Computer	20
The Way of Wisdom	24